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PROGRAMMING AND COORDINATION MATTERS RELATED TO THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

Improvement of the status of women in the Secretariat

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. The General Assembly, in resolution 46/100 of 16 December 1991, asked the Secretary-General to accord priority to the recruitment and promotion of women in posts subject to geographical distribution, particularly in senior policy-level and decision-making posts, in order to achieve the goals set in resolutions 45/125 and 45/239 C, adopted a year earlier - namely an overall participation rate of 35 per cent and, to the extent possible, 25 per cent in posts at the D-1 level and above by 1995.

2. The same resolution requested that the Secretary-General ensure that a comprehensive study of the barriers to the advancement of women and an action programme for the advancement of women in the Secretariat for the period 1991-1995 be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-seventh session and that a progress report be given to the Commission on the Status of Women at its thirty-sixth session, to be held in Vienna from 11 to 20 March 1992.

3. At the end of the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly, it was agreed that during the short period between the end of the regular session of the General Assembly and the opening of the Commission on the Status of Women, a brief statistical update on the status of women in the Secretariat would be prepared and a progress report presented to the Commission.

4. The statistical update is given in section I below. Section II consists of a progress report on the comprehensive study of the barriers to the advancement of women and includes elements of the action programme for the advancement of women for the period 1991-1995. Section III deals with the institutional arrangements for the office of the Focal Point and section IV outlines the recommendations contained in the sixth report of the Steering Committee for the Improvement of the Status of Women in the Secretariat.

I. STATISTICAL UPDATE

5. Paragraph 12 of the Secretary-General's report on the improvement of the status of women in the Secretariat (A/46/377) reported that the percentage of women in posts subject to geographical distribution was 29.2 as of 30 June 1991. During the six months ending on 31 December 1991, that percentage rose to 29.9 per cent, a fraction short of the 1990 target of 30 per cent women overall on posts subject to geographical distribution, set by prior Assembly resolutions. There are now 784 women on posts subject to geographical distribution as compared with 1,838 men.

6. In terms of higher-level posts (D-1 level and above), women numbered 32, or 8.6 per cent of the total of 372 staff members at those levels as at the end of June 1991. By 31 December 1991, the number of women in posts D-1 and above rose to 35, or 9.3 per cent of the total of 375 posts at those levels. Comparable percentages in December 1990 were 28.7 per cent overall and 6.8 per cent for posts at the D-1 level and above. The increase during 1990-1991 in the number of women occupying higher-level posts from 6.8 to 9.3 per cent - over two percentage points - is the biggest to date, but still a long way from the targeted 25 per cent set for 1995.

7. During the calendar year ending 31 December 1991, the number of women promoted was 45, or 33.6 per cent, as compared with 89 men.

8. The number of women recruited into the United Nations Secretariat for the calendar year 1991 was 44 women, or 34.1 per cent, as compared with 85 men. Between July and December 1991, 15 women were recruited. The 35-per-cent goal set for the end of 1995, taking into account retirements and normal attrition, requires the recruitment of at least 75 women each year. Given the freeze imposed on recruitment during the current restructuring exercise, the 35- and 25-per-cent targets present a daunting challenge. A 35-per-cent share of the total staff figure of 2,600 means 910 women by 1995. At present, as stated above, women on posts subject to geographical distribution number only 784.

9. In accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin (ST/SGB/246), the Vacancy Management and Staff Redeployment System was discontinued, effective 1 January 1992, and replaced by the Placement and Promotion System involving the annual comprehensive grade-by-grade promotion review provided for in staff rule 104.14 (f) (iii). Additionally, due to the reform of the organizational structure now under way in the United Nations Secretariat, the Secretary-General has temporarily suspended regular recruitment until further notice.

II. COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION

10. Ms. Clare Devlin, a consultant on loan from the Government of Canada, spent nine weeks between August and December 1991 at three duty stations - New York, Geneva and Vienna - interviewing over 150 staff members from 66 different countries and meeting with delegates from 15 Member States. The staff members interviewed held positions in 24 departments and offices and ranged in rank from General Service to Under-Secretary-General. In addition, she examined statistical data covering the years 1975-1991 on representation, recruitment and promotion of women and men in the Secretariat.

11. Her study of the data shows that a "glass ceiling" exists at the P-4 level for women in the Secretariat and that their virtual absence at the senior policy and decision-making levels does not allow for a meaningful examination of posts at those levels.

12. In terms of geographical distribution, while women are underrepresented overall, the women from North America and Western Europe hold a larger share of all positions occupied by women. The share of posts occupied by women from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa is proportionately lower. Her study finds that one third of the women hold positions in administration. There are fewer women in economics, and the political and social occupational fields. Moreover, women are virtually absent from the decision-making levels in all fields.

13. Between 1985 and 1991 women were recruited at an average rate of 26 per cent each year, a rate insufficient to meet the General Assembly targets of 35 per cent by 1995. In terms of the targeted 25 per cent for posts at the D-1 level and above, there is currently an insufficient critical mass of women at the P-5 level to reach the target by 1995 and women are not being brought in at senior levels in any significant numbers.

14. The consultant's proposals for inclusion in the action programme for the period 1991-1995 stresses recruitment from the African, Middle Eastern and Eastern European regions in economics, political affairs and administration occupational groupings at levels P-4, P-5 and higher. She proposes the extension of the National Competitive Examinations to a larger number of

Member States than the current 15 or so where the Examinations are given, and she stresses that at least 50 per cent of the entrants from those exams must be women. This proposal requires further study. She recommends, too, an annual review with programme managers, identifying forecasted vacancies by department, unit, occupation and grade, for the purpose of establishing specific strategies and annual targets for women in each departmental unit.

III. INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

15. In response to the requirement in General Assembly resolution 46/100 that the Secretary-General ensure that adequate machinery with the authority of enforcement and the responsibility of accountability, including a senior-level official devoted to the implementation of the action programme, be maintained, the Secretary-General has regularized the post of Focal Point in the Office of the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management (OHRM) and has established an additional post at the GS-6 level to assist her.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE

16. In its sixth report, the Steering Committee for the Improvement of the Status of Women in the Secretariat pointed out that Article 8 of the Charter requires that men and women participate in the work of the Organization under conditions of equality. It believed that in terms of the Secretariat, that concept of participation meant "first and foremost, involvement at all levels in effectuating the mission of the United Nations".

17. The Committee reiterated its recommendations with regard to assignment and promotion, made in its fifth report - namely, that in departments and offices with less than 35 per cent women overall and in those with less than 25 per cent women at levels P-5 and above, qualified women candidates be given priority for promotion and recruitment.

18. With regard to improving the career prospects for staff in the secretarial occupation, the Committee recommended that the Secretary-General remedy the situation for secretaries either through personal promotions - that is, staff members meeting the requirement of seniority in grade and performance would be promoted to the next grade - or through the restructuring of the occupation, or a combination of the two. The Office of Human Resources Management was in the process of completing the restructuring exercise for staff in New York.

19. Further to a recommendation of the Steering Committee, the Office was developing procedures to deal fairly and firmly with sexual harassment in the Secretariat. Three working groups, chaired by the Director of Staff Management, were currently at work drafting those documents.